Opposite
Detail from 'Carnival Against the Nazis!', poster for Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, 1978

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INTRODUCTION

David King's trajectory as a designer was highly unusual. It was idiosyncratic, centred on a mission that was self-chosen and particular to King, while moving in parallel with developments in graphic design that may not have interested him much, even if he knew about them. King pursued his goals with total dedication and an infectiously gleeful enthusiasm that everyone who knew him comments on without exception; I saw it myself. He began as a graphic designer, rapidly transformed himself into a visual journalist, started a private collection believed to be the largest of its kind in the world, and became an author of visual histories and an organiser of exhibitions that were widely discussed in the international press. Pieces from King's collection were on view in a dedicated 'David King' room at Tate Modern in London for 14 years and, in 2016, shortly before his death, his entire collection was acquired for the nation by the gallery. If the 1980s was a decade of transition for King, as he juggled his priorities as designer, collector and author, by the mid-1990s he had largely left his everyday work as a designer behind to concentrate on his collection and his visual histories, though as we shall see, his design awareness informed these activities at a fundamental level. He took photographs, made wooden furniture and paintings on wood and he wrote fluent and forceful prose, though he did not think of himself as a writer. In later life, when asked by new acquaintances at social events what he did, he no longer knew how to describe himself succinctly and tended to dodge the question, even at the risk of looking rude.[1] Was King to all intents and purposes an artist? Certainly, he belongs to a still inadequately defined and critically framed category of cross-disciplinary activity that he exemplifies more persuasively than any other figure to emerge from British graphic design in recent decades.

In the mid-1990s, when King was pushing towards his most productive period as an author, the subject of 'design authorship' was in the ascendant, too. As Michael Rock writes in his essay 'The Designer as Author', 'authorship' had become a fashionable term in design discourse, particularly 'at the edges of the profession: the design academies and the murky territory between art and design'.[2] Rock notes that the question of how a designer might become an author is awkward and his essay goes on to investigate, with a measure of scepticism, some of the ways in which a designer's personal vision might be expressed through graphic design, a medium most commonly commissioned by clients with a pressing 'vision' of their own. For our purposes, the most significant (and indeed obvious) of these avenues is taken by the designer who publishes material about graphic design, especially books, and there are numerous instances of this kind of authorship in the history of graphic design.[3] Graphic designers are, after all, the leading experts in this subject matter. Rock argues that in the most complete form of graphic authorship 'the content is […] embedded in the form – that is, the formal exploration is as much the content […] as the writing.'[4] Design commentators are inclined to overestimate the significance of form as a type of 'content' for ordinary viewers; nevertheless the point is relevant to a review of King's activities and he held strong opinions of his own on the form–content relationship. It is certainly the case that designers who can both originate content and take full control of its visual form are 'authors' in the broadest sense of the word.

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David King, 1985. Star-shaped wooden wall piece, political photomontage, poster artwork and stool by King. Photograph: Ben Rice

The first book King co-authored, *Trotsky: A Documentary*, was published in 1972 by Penguin Books, a high-profile imprint, and sold 25,000 copies; his second, *I Am King: A Photographic Biography of Muhammad Ali*, followed three years later, also for Penguin.[5] In the 1980s, King co-authored three more books, all of which he also designed, based on content from his collection. 'Designer as author' he was, yet his body of work did not feature as an example in 1990s debates about authorship and it has never been engaged with on those terms.[6] There are several possible reasons for the initial neglect. First, King's output was not focused on graphic design as a subject, at least not overtly, and designers were never its primary audience. Second, by his own choice he was much less visible as a designer by the mid-1990s and his graphic style was out of fashion, although this was of no concern to King who had found a broader audience for his interests and mission.[7] Third, the American designer–theorists who were the principal exponents of the 'designer as author' imperative in relation to contemporary practice were unlikely to have been aware of King's earlier books and would have known even less of his work in the 1970s and 1980s

David John King was born on 30 April 1943 in Isleworth, west of London. His father, Stanley (known as John), was a bank manager at the Midland Bank in Great Portland Street, London, and later Kensington High Street, and his mother, Doris, kept the house. King inherited his father's prudence where money was concerned.[1] He had a sister, Pam, who was four years older, and they grew up in South Kenton, near Wembley. 'You could see the Wrigley's Spearmint chewing gum factory out of our back window. I loved the gaslights and dense blue smog in winter. You couldn't see a thing, day or night, it was very weird in those days, haunted.'[2] When King was around 12 they moved to Northwood, which he liked less. He was educated privately at University College School in Frognal, Hampstead, and his visual awakening began early. From the age of eight, his great-aunt Sarah, always known as Auntie Louie and by then in her early eighties, would take him all over London. 'We just saw every gallery and every painting it was possible to see: Royal Academy, National Gallery, Wellington Museum, Courtauld, all those places.'[3] His great-grandfather, an engineer for the Great Western Railway, had helped to build the Russian railway network before the Revolution and King was excited by tales of his adventures. His 'Uncle' Tom – Pam's godfather – was a socialist and had worked for the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, formed in 1936 to aid victims of the Spanish Civil War. 'My parents weren't leftist at all, but he [Tom] used to visit a lot and the rows that used to take place, the political rows, were fantastic,' King recalled.[4] Art and politics were present as possibilities from an early age and King identified, while still a boy, with the left. 'Even as a child I detested capitalism,' he writes.[5] He was good at art and his father, who was supportive, suggested he study design rather than take the riskier path of fine art. King later revealed that, growing up during the Cold War, he had considered doing a course in Russian at Manchester University.[6]

In 1960, at the age of 17, King began a diploma course in typography at the London School of Printing and Graphic Arts (now London College of Communication) at the school's Back Hill site in Clerkenwell. He described himself at this stage in his life as 'disaffected', 'rather tormented' and as a 'nervous, disengaged teenager'.[7] He formed an immediate friendship with Richard Weigand, who recalls his 'intensely focused eyes, the obsessive passions, the explosive laugh and wild gestures'.[8] 'David was insightful, intelligent, charming. He could be mean, ungenerous and insensitive. He either liked you or didn't.'[9] In his first year, alongside 16 other students in his group, King studied general and museum drawing, figure and objective drawing, history of art, history of type, basic design, typographic design, hand composition and lettering. His highest marks at the end of the year were for typographic design, though he said later that there was very little typography.[10] Another friend, Alfreda Benge, remembers his decisive way of working: 'He was confident and he would get stuff and put it on a bit of paper and then put some Cow Gum on it, and then slam it with his fist and wherever he put it first, without even thinking, was the right place.'[11]

The head of the graphic design department was Tom Eckersley, a distinguished designer of posters since the 1930s, whose aim at LSPGA, Paul Rennie writes, 'was to help clarify and define an English graphic language for the new realities of 60s Britain'.[12] The visual thinking of the Bauhaus was a strong influence on the department's teaching. Eckersley introduced students to an eclectic range of lecturers and King noted later that this was one of the strengths of the course.[13] Several of these teachers were to prove particularly significant and influential for him; perhaps the foremost of these, at the time, was the German artist Rolf Brandt, brother of the photographer Bill Brandt, who taught basic design 'in the abstract', encompassing composition, colour and the use of materials. 'I learned from Rolf more than anybody, because he was much less of a typographer and much more about visual thinking,' King recalled.[14] The designer Richard Hollis, another influential figure for King, describes one of the exercises he and Brandt set for basic design in the first year: 'The student had to choose a 1-inch square from a printed image and enlarge it using a squared-up grid to a 6-inch square.'[15] As King observed, 'It was about *forcing* yourself to look.'[16] We can see the seeds here of King's later penchant for extreme cropping of an image.

Robin Fior, an assistant lecturer who taught one afternoon a week, would become a lifelong friend. It was Fior who introduced King to the typeface Franklin Gothic Bold, virtually a signature in King's later work. King's activist posters were in a direct line of

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David King, early 1960s

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Attributed to King, 'CuBang' poster, protesting against the Cuban Missile Crisis, letterpress, 1962
63.7 × 42.8 cm

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6
Robin Fior, 'Polaris "NO"', poster for Committee of 100, screenprint, 1961
74.5 × 101.6 cm

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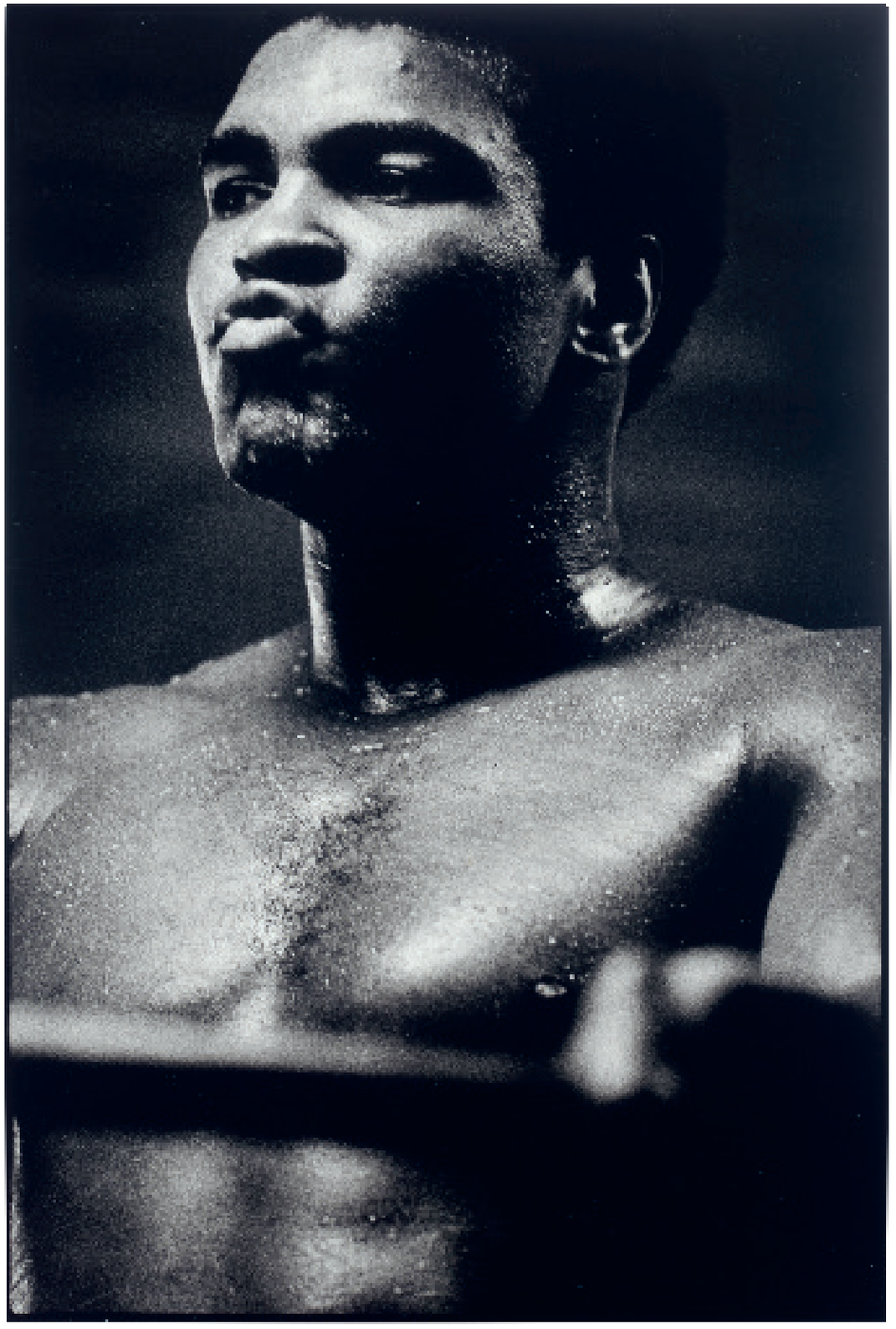


54

52 (previous pages)
David King, Muhammad Ali in training, Pennsylvania, gelatin silver print, January 1974
37.1 × 55.6 cm

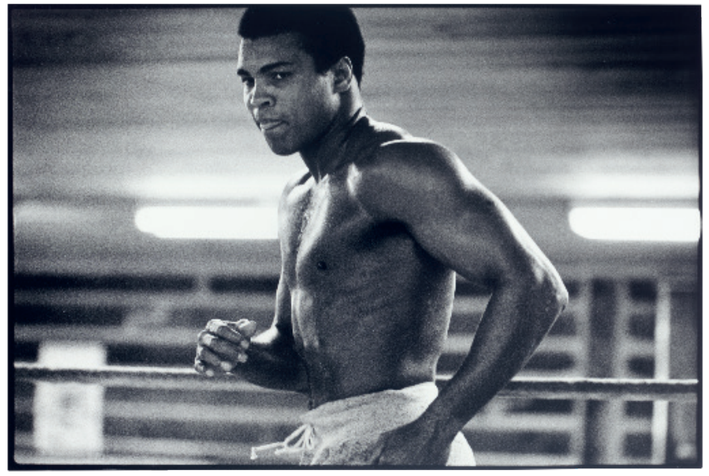
53
David King, Muhammad Ali in training, Pennsylvania, gelatin silver print, January 1974
55.6 × 37.1 cm

54
David King, Muhammad Ali in training, contact sheet, 1974
39 × 45.5 cm

55
David King, Muhammad Ali in training, Pennsylvania, gelatin silver print, January 1974
37.3 × 55.8 cm

56 (overleaf)
David King, Muhammad Ali in training, Pennsylvania, gelatin silver print, January 1974
37.4 × 55.6 cm

55



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VISUAL ACTIVISM

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114
Rock Against Racism badge, 1976

115
Women Against Nazis, a variation on the Anti-Nazi League logo, printed proof, slightly trimmed at edges, 1978
42.6 × 48 cm

116
Anti-Nazi League logo, printed large for use as a placard at protests, 1978
43.3 cm in diameter

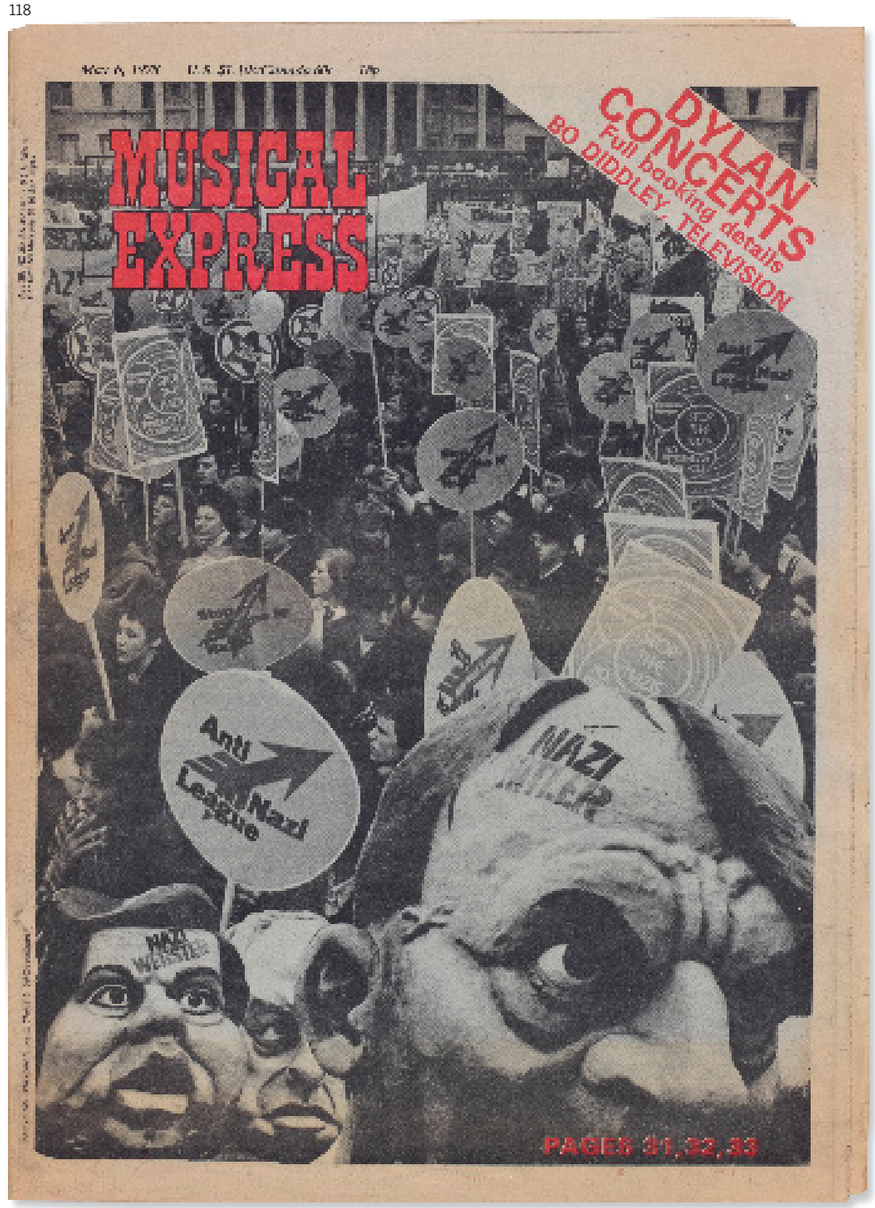
117
Carl Weinrother, photograph of protest against the Nazis, showing the Iron Front symbol in use, Berlin, 1932

116

Please strengthen black type in this artwork to full black

117

118



118
***New Musical Express*, web offset lithography, 6 May 1978.**
Photograph of crowd: Denis O'Regan.
Effigies: Chris L. Urca

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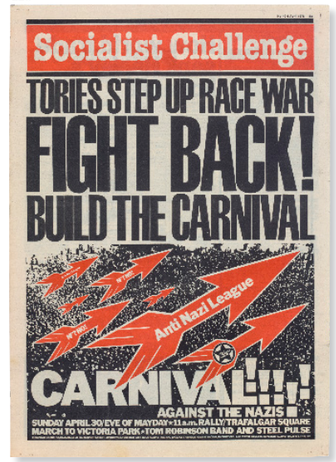

119
***Socialist Challenge*, no. 40, web offset lithography, 6 April 1978.**
King's 'Carnival Against the Nazis!' poster is integrated as editorial matter

120 (overleaf)
'Carnival Against the Nazis!', poster for Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, offset lithography, 1978
62.7 × 88.8 cm

203

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203
King's library with the wooden shelves he constructed himself, 2016. The ladder leads to an overhead sleeping platform for guests.
Photograph: Lucy Dawkins

204
King photographing albums by Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova in Rodchenko's studio, Moscow, March 1990.
Photograph: Alexander Lavrentiev

very rare items.'[7] That year, he produced an A4 typewritten wish list with bold Letraset headings – 'Books wanted', 'Magazines wanted' – and stars for emphasis. 'I am a private collector of pictorial/photographic/graphic/illustrated books relating to Russia in the Twentieth Century. […] I am also interested in magazines, original photographs and posters […] In short, anything visual on Soviet Russia.'[8] The list included any photographic material on Trotsky, Stalin and the October Revolution, any work by El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko, Gustav Klutsis, Dmitry Moor, Viktor Deni and Boris Efimov, *Pro Eto* by Vladimir Mayakovsky, *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, *China Pictorial* and 'especially the magazine *USSR in Construction*' (which he underlined).

USSR in Construction, published in Russian, English, French and German between 1930 and 1941, and from 1938 in Spanish, provides a telling example of King's relentlessness as a searcher, often sustained over many years. He wrote to countless organisations, individuals and bookshops in pursuit of the magazine, spectacularly designed by Lissitzky, Rodchenko and others. In 1976 these potential sources of information and/or copies included the Communist Party of Great Britain, the British Soviet Friendship Society, the London

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***Red Star over Russia* exhibition, showing material from the David King Collection at Tate Modern, London, 2017**

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Matthew Gale and Natalia Sidlina (eds), *Red Star over Russia: A Revolution in Visual Culture 1905–55*, published by Tate Publishing, 2017. Design: Emma Garnsey. 'Emancipated Woman: Build Socialism!' by Adolf Strakhov, 1926 (detail)

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worked in those terms, that encapsulates the exciting and terrible things that went on, both visually and in terms of the true history of what happened.'[57] *Red Star over Russia* is the visual history that King planned it to be, but it is also the most comprehensive and wide-ranging survey of the posters, photographs and graphics that he had amassed over four decades (King calls it a 'heavy bombardment'), as well as being a deeply personal testament. 'As I write this, my top floor studio is in chaos,' he confides in the book's introduction. 'Thousands of Russian photographs and graphics, unused or about to be used, are piled high on trestle tables or scattered all over the floor.'[58] The notes, anecdotes and memories that followed would provide a glimpse of how this 'chaos of collecting' had come to exist.[59]

Red Star over Russia is a brilliant recapitulation of what King had been doing with pictures ever since his work for *The Sunday Times Magazine* (fig. 251). The flow of images feels so natural that it seems effortless. This is the art that conceals art. King continued to employ the same method of construction that he had used all along, positioning copies of the pictures on paper layouts, which the designer Kate Tattersall afterwards translated into digital form on the computer. This modus operandi, once the foundation of page design, allowed him to see and weigh alternative sizes of the images at their actual size and, most crucially, to judge and fine-tune the impact of their sequencing, like a series of frames and edits in a film. Across the 352 pages of *Red Star over Russia*, King repeatedly cuts back and forth between largely colour images (sometimes one to a page; sometimes several to a spread), full-page photographic bleeds, often in black and white, and huge immersive photographs, with a slight yellow or sepia tinge to enhance their aura, which bleed on all four sides of wordless double-page spreads (fig. 253). He never allows the pace to slacken or interest to flag. The book is loaded with potentially competitive images, yet everything has the correct amount of space to register effectively. King once again uses thin vertical rules to separate pictures and text. Vertical section titles slotted into the

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251
David King, *Red Star over Russia: A Visual History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Death of Stalin*, published by Tate Publishing, offset lithography, 2009. 'Join the Red Cavalry!', a recruitment poster by V. Silkin, 1920 (detail)
29 × 24.6 cm